

# Online News Consumers Become Own Editors

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J.D. Lasica used to visit 20 to 30 Web sites for his daily fix of news. Now, he's down to three - yet he consumes more news online than ever. Lasica is among a growing breed of information consumers who use the latest Internet technologies to completely bypass the home pages of news sites and jump directly to articles that interest them.

He can scan some 200 Web journals and traditional news sites - all without actually going out and visiting them.

Online news consumers are increasingly taking charge, getting their news a la carte from a variety of outlets. Rarely do they depend on a single news organization's vision of the day's top stories.

"The old idea of surfers coming to your Web site and coming to your front door, that's going away," said Lasica, a former editor at The Sacramento Bee. "People are going to come in through the side window, through the basement, through the attic, anyway they want to."

Some Web sites are already responding.

"When we all started this 10 years ago, we wanted to be the one and only place people come to," said Jim Brady, executive editor of The Washington Post's Web site.

These days, he said, the Post is happy simply to be one of many sources checked daily. He sees his home page as a starting point, and during the July 7 bombings in London, the Post even linked to the BBC, something unfathomable a few years ago.

The Post and Knight Ridder Digital, meanwhile, are redesigning Web sites to spread elements previously found only on home pages.

And in a case of "if you can't beat them, join them," Knight Ridder Inc., Gannett Co. and Tribune Co. collectively bought three-quarters of Topix.net, a startup that provides tools for readers to bypass news home pages. The New York Times has been paying an undisclosed amount to have its headlines featured there.

Topix provides direct links to news stories it collects and sorts from more than 10,000 sources, and it slices story by category as well as region, down to the ZIP code.

A news aggregation service from Google Inc. scans more than 4,500 English sources and uses software to rank and display stories to which it links, while America Online Inc. and Yahoo Inc. offer services that rely more on humans.

Yahoo News, rather than trying to keep readers from leaving, provides easy access to articles elsewhere using Really Simple Syndication, or RSS, a technology that immediately notifies users of new entries on their favorite news sites and Web journals.

"In this world where people are looking for multiple points of view, if all you're giving them is your view, ... they are going to leave anyway and maybe be less likely to come back," said Neil Budde, general manager for Yahoo News.

Many news organizations have tried to render online a packaged product in the mold of the traditional newspaper or broadcast. That mentality is changing, but slowly, Budde said.

News outlets are starting to add tools to untether readers from home pages. The Associated Press, Reuters and others, for example, are adding RSS support so readers can use tools like Yahoo's to display summaries and access stories directly.

Web journals, or blogs, present another way to bypass home pages. Many are topic-centric and carry links that present the blogger's rather than a news editor's vision of the top news items.

Some traditional news sites, including the Post, are even beginning to let their columnists link to outside sources.

According to Nielsen/NetRatings, Yahoo News had 24.9 million visitors in June, more than any single news outlet on the Internet, and only MSNBC and CNN had more visitors than AOL News.

Google News ranked 13th among news sites.

At The New York Times' Web site, referrals from RSS feeds account for only 2 percent of traffic but represent the fastest growth - 8.5 million page views in June compared with about a half million in late 2003.

The new tools bring opportunities such as better ad targeting, but they also present some challenges. The news agency Agence France-Presse, for one, has sued Google for copyright infringement over Google News' use of photos and story excerpts.

Aggregators and feeds also potentially let readers select only the topics they care about, ignoring other developments editors might deem important, said Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project and former managing editor at U.S. News and World Report.

But Charlie Tillinghast, general manager and publisher for MSNBC.com, said the new tools can also alert readers to once-obscure items they might not otherwise have seen.

Knight Ridder considers tools like Google News and Topix as "nothing but incremental traffic from people who might not have otherwise seen the site," said Ross Settles, its vice president of strategy.

During the Scott Peterson murder trial, for instance, the chain's San Francisco area papers saw increases in traffic from outside the area.

The new age of online news will still need reporters to produce stories and editors to make judgment calls.

The need for partners to provide content will never go away, said Lewis D'Vorkin, editor in chief for AOL News.

Home pages will continue to serve as a jumping off point for some readers, and MSNBC recently beefed up its home page to include customized headlines that are chosen based on stories the reader recently read.

But to stay relevant, online news sites must ultimately overcome their reluctance to point elsewhere, said blogging pioneer Dave Winer.

"The reader wants lots of sources and doesn't particularly care whether you point offsite or onsite," Winer said. "They

just want the story."

And while news executives insist their brands will remain important as trustworthy destinations, some readers prefer to trust individual bloggers or friends who forward news items via e-mail.

Nicco Mele, webmaster for Howard Dean's presidential campaign, said he rarely visits news sites directly anymore and instead trusts bloggers like Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, a Dean supporter.

Pointing to Moulitsas at a recent conference, Mele remarked, "I'll read what he thinks I should read."

Associated Press

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